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ABSTRACT

Equitable outdoor leadership responsive to social justice issues has historically been absent in the field of adventure education. The call for social justice in the field has been hampered by lack of information, negligible programmatic support, personal conditioning and bias, resistance to reform from those in power, and firmly established traditions in outdoor leadership. Researchers attempting to identify key competencies needed by leaders of outdoor adventures, for example, asked only experienced outdoor leaders for input. Since a disproportionate number of respondents were White males with advanced degrees, the voices of the poor, women, and racial minorities in the field were not prevalent in determining key components of outdoor leadership. Gender biased language, such as using the words "hard" and "soft" to describe skills better defined as "technical" or "interpersonal," has also made it difficult for the development of socially just programs. Most accreditation program literature is lacking in any mention of social and cultural competencies in outdoor leaders and program administrators. One example of a socially just program offering Bachelor's of Science and Master's of Science degrees in environmental education is examined. Contains 16 references. (Author/TSP)

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Social Justice in Outdoor Leadership

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B. Baker

ABSTRACT

This workshop, designed for those with a prior exposure to social justice issues, explores race, class, and gender-sensitive leadership in the outdoors. We examine social class status, cultural sensitivity, and feminist leadership in the outdoors. We collectively determine what constitutes equitable outdoor experiences and share strategies and exemplary practices in leading them. This workshop is designed for advanced practitioners and administrators looking for additional training in facilitating equitable programs.

Introduction

Equitable outdoor leadership responsive to social justice issues has historically been absent in the field of adventure education. Socially just outdoor leadership might include an awareness and action on the part of outdoor leaders about unequal distributions of power in society based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, ability, and religion. Outdoor leaders who take intentional steps to mitigate these power inequalities contribute to the establishment of socially just leadership in the outdoor experiential education field. However, the call for social justice in the field has been hampered by lack of information, negligible programmatic support, personal conditioning and bias, resistance to reform from those in power, and firmly established traditions in outdoor leadership.

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A History of Socially Just Leadership in the Outdoor Experiential Education Movement

Since any call for reform must investigate the underlying reasons for the previous exclusion, we will detail three major influences in the outdoor experiential education field that have caused a resistance to social justice work in the field. All three influences, found prevalently in the outdoor leadership literature, have served to keep the absence of an imperative for race, class, and gender-responsible outdoor leadership in place.

The Competencies Research

Competencies for leaders in the outdoor field were developed by a number of researchers (Buell, 1981; Green; 1981; Swiderski, 1981; Priest; 1987a) in the 1980s. These researchers attempted to identify the key competencies needed to be a competent leader of outdoor adventure pursuits. The essential competencies from the research included the design and use of an appropriate first aid kit, possessing the necessary physical fitness, limiting activities to participant capabilities (Buell, 1981), having good judgment and common sense, handling potential safety problems (Green, 1981), ability to anticipate possible accidents, and awareness of small-group dynamics (Priest, 1984).

Relying on competencies to determine the important components of outdoor leadership is problematic since competencies tend to be conservative replications of previous practice. Since they are predicated on determining the thinking of "a blue ribbon panel of experts" (Priest, 1987a) or "experienced-level leaders" (Buell, 1981), they risk perpetuating the prevailing norms about outdoor leadership rather than infusing new ideas from the margins of social justice work. Further, the experts who responded tended to be male and of undisclosed racial or class background. Ninety-two percent of respondents in Priest's study were men who also happened to have "a disproportionate number of ad-

vanced educational degrees" (p. 46), 82% of those sampled in Green's research were men, and 67% in Buell's survey. Clearly, the voices of the poor, women, and racial minorities in the field were not prevalent in determining the key components of outdoor leadership.

Many training programs for outdoor leaders then used these competencies as a basis of curriculum development. The result is that most of the literature used to train outdoor leaders is completely devoid of either a discussion of issues of race, class, and gender or a suggestion of facilitation methods to deal with diversity in outdoor courses (see Drury & Bonney, 1992; Ford & Blanchard, 1985; Simer & Sullivan, 1983).

To further problematize the competencies' influence, what arose in the outdoor leadership field was an assumption of a generic or universal model of outdoor leadership and associated training (Bell, 1993). This notion of universal outdoor leadership fails to include the explicit experience of people of color, women, or the less privileged. As Bell (1996) asserts, "Thinly veiled is the gendered, race-based organization of the subjectivity of the leader, such that it is European, able-bodied, autonomous, objective, and rational men who are predisposed to make sound decisions and be natural leaders" (p. 144).

This absence of a "social and cultural competency" in the competencies literature maintained the silence about the needs of socially and culturally diverse participants and leaders.

"Hard" Skills Versus "Soft" Skills Debate

The next wave of influence was from those who championed the importance of "soft" skills to complement the "hard" skills in outdoor leadership (Swiderski, 1987; Phipps & Swiderski, 1990). Soft skills included interpersonal, communication, and group skills. In spite of Jordan's (1990) suggestion that the use of the terms "hard" and "soft" skills are sexist, the usage prevails today.

Some outdoor experiential educators prefer to use the words technical and interpersonal skills to describe these different yet equally important competencies for outdoor leaders. The terms technical and interpersonal are neutral and effective descriptors of these skills. They move away from inherent value judgments placed on soft equals feminine equals less valued in an outdoor setting, versus hard equals masculine equals more valuable in an outdoor setting. Debates about the relative value of the two skill groups were followed by questions of how to teach "soft" skills. Since "soft skills" were vaguely defined and articulated, it was difficult to determine how to train leaders to use them. Although there are resources and training materials in group development and group process facilitation, most of this material exists in the field of psychology and has not necessarily been integral to the development of the field of outdoor leadership until fairly recently. The ability to lead socially just outdoor experiences is probably nested in the "soft" or interpersonal category, but because it is never explicitly named as a "soft" or interpersonal skill, it is usually ignored or overlooked.

The Accreditation Trend

When the debate about certifying outdoor leaders exhausted itself in the US (Priest, 1987b), accreditation of programs became fashionable (Warren, 1991). Yet again, absent in the standards for accreditation was any attention to race, class, and gender-sensitive outdoor leadership or any attempt to hold programs accountable in training their staff to be culturally sensitive in program delivery (Priest & Dixon, 1990). While there are standards about universal programming to alleviate some access problems for differently abled participants and one section about preserving cultural artifacts on trips (Williamson & Gass, 1993), little is said in the accreditation literature about the social and cultural competency of leaders and program administrators.

There are a few outdoor programs with a white, middle-class faculty, board, staff, and student body beginning to tackle the issue of social justice as integral to an effective outdoor education curriculum. One example, the Audubon Expedition Institute, which offers B.S. and M.S. degrees in its unique brand of environmental education, has a curriculum predicated on four distinct and interwoven curricular strands: natural history and ecological theory, cultural and human ecology, community and personal development and education, and transformational learning.

Faculty offer training and development to students on topics such as group process, facilitation, and diversity awareness. The faculty is given the opportunity to participate in professional development in these topics as well. They have responsibility for scrutinizing syllabi, readings, and the multitude of infield resource experiences to provide a multicultural perspective for students. Assessment and evaluation forms are currently being designed to include competency for faculty in the area of social justice awareness. The organization has begun to actively examine how to fully integrate social justice into the fabric of the organization, from the board to the direct practice and experience of faculty and students in the program. The initiative, with the potential for effective and lasting change, takes time, patience, and funding.

What can be concluded from the examination of the three influences of competencies, hard skill versus soft skill debates, and accreditation trends is that historical bias clouds the potential to incorporate more socially equitable practices in outdoor leadership. The trend of silencing or ignoring anti-bias work in the field will continue as long as the literature leaves out any discussion of the issues involved or how to train equitable outdoor leaders.

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